

Woodbine Brotherhood Synagogue
612 Washington Avenue
Woodbine, Cape May County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-866

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5-WOB1,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

WOODBINE BROTHERHOOD SYNAGOGUE

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Location 612 Washington Avenue, Woodbine, Cape May County,
New Jersey

Present Owner Woodbine Brotherhood

Present Occupant Woodbine Brotherhood

Present Use Synagogue

Statement of Significance The Woodbine Brotherhood Synagogue was built by the Woodbine Brotherhood as the religious, cultural, and educational center of a colony of East European Jewish immigrants. Constructed entirely by the colonists on an American design, the Synagogue is symbolic of several basic characteristics of Woodbine. It is a response to the need for a place to practice a religion central to the life of the community. It expresses a cultural continuity in a new land, while also fusing American ways with East European tradition.

PART I HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Background

The origins and history of the Woodbine Brotherhood Synagogue are inextricably tied to the development of Woodbine itself. Woodbine was the largest and most successful of a number of towns established in South Jersey for and by East European Jewish immigrants in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Pogroms and general persecutions of this period in Russia were the impetus for many Jews to take up once again their search for the Promised Land, assisted by western European and American Jews who provided funds for settling immigrants in the United States. Among those giving help were the Baron de Hirsch Fund, the American funnel for the fortune made by Baron Maurice de Hirsch in western European railways. The Fund was established in 1891 to aid the Vineland area colonies, and Woodbine in particular.

Woodbine was founded in 1891 with three hundred Russian and Rumanian refugees settled on a 5,300 acre estate bought by the Fund from a local judge. The aim was to establish a model agricultural community, but the difficulty of making a living from the recalcitrant land spurred, within the first year, the institution of factories for soft goods, particularly clothing.

Initially, the colony survived primarily through the support of the Baron de Hirsch Fund. The founding organization, the Woodbine Land and Improvement Company, was a subsidiary of the Fund. The Fund made necessary loans, held the mortgages of homesteads, and subsidized factories and the Baron de Hirsch Agricultural School. In 1903, however, Woodbine was incorporated as an all-Jewish borough, and hailed (by David

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Blaustein in the magazine "Circle") as the "first self-governed Jewish community since the fall of Jerusalem."¹ Although the colony suffered regular economic setbacks, it was nevertheless outstanding among such experiments for its civic capability.

Within a decade of its founding, the population of Woodbine had increased to 2,500, and the colony had established its own board of health, volunteer fire department, Village Improvement Association, and Educational Alliance. Among its civic organizations, the most important was the Woodbine Brotherhood, or Agudath Achim Anshei Woodbine, founded in 1893. In its Articles of Incorporation (filed in Cape May County on December 18) the Brotherhood describes itself as a "benevolent association" whose object is "relief and support of such members . . . as shall by sickness, casualty or other cause be rendered incapable of attending to their usual occupations or calling; diffuse principles of benevolence and charity, promote decent interments of deceased members, and promote religion and morality by means of daily and Sunday Schools (sic)."² The Brotherhood provided illness and death and survivors' benefits in the tradition of fraternal orders. It also ran a school, and was called by H.L. Sabsovich, the Baron de Hirsch Fund's Woodbine Manager, "the prime mover of all public enterprises."³ It was this organization that built the Woodbine Brotherhood Synagogue, dedicated in 1896.

The establishment of the Woodbine Brotherhood and its Synagogue is an important milestone in the development of the East European Jewish colonies of South Jersey. Clearly, the Synagogue was built in response to the need for a house of worship and a place for learning and community gatherings. It was also an assertion of the colony's individuality and independence. Finally, the building is a physical manifestation of the acculturation process of East Europeans in North America. Externally, it presents a solid and simple American civic composition, while at the same time conforming to traditional Orthodox Jewish design requirements.

¹ David Blaustein, "The First Self-Governed Jewish Community Since the Fall of Jerusalem," Circles: A Modern Department Magazine for All People, Vol. II (1907), as quoted in Joseph Brandes, Immigrants to Freedom: Jewish Communities in Rural New Jersey Since 1882 (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. 255

² Woodbine Brotherhood Articles of Incorporation, Woodbine Brotherhood Papers, American Jewish Historical Society, Waltham, Mass.

³ Brandes, Op. Cit., p. 218

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B. Physical History

The Woodbine Brotherhood Synagogue (Agudas Achim Anshei Woodbine) stands on land originally owned by the Baron de Hirsch Fund and administered by its subsidiary, the Woodbine Land and Improvement Company. It was built under the direction of the Woodbine Brotherhood, with the colonists themselves providing all the labor. A loan of \$2,500 from the Baron de Hirsch Fund covered some costs of materials -- all of which were local. When more cash was needed, almost the entire colony turned out to work on a local road construction project, contributing their pay to the Synagogue fund.

The Synagogue was dedicated on the eve of Hanukkah, November 29, 1896, although the interior was not yet completed. There is some disagreement in available documents over the cost of the building. It seems, however, to have been in the range of \$6,000 to \$8,000, including interior finish and some improvements made prior to 1915, at which time the Baron de Hirsch Fund loan was paid off.

Date of Dedication: November 29, 1896

Architect: Not Known

Alterations: A number of alterations were made to the building over time, very few of which are specifically documented. Among those for which documentation does exist are electrical wiring in 1903 and roofing and other repairs in 1924. In 1925 the congregation expressed the intention to remodel the building. It is possibly at that time that the existing exterior stairs were built and the windows changed.

C. Important Persons and Events Connected with the Structure

The dedication of the Woodbine Synagogue was a major event in the history of the Woodbine Colony, and celebrated a significant achievement on the part of the Colonists. The ceremony was attended by Trustees of the Baron de Hirsch Fund, who took the opportunity to inspect the Colony, as well as by notable figures in the Philadelphia Jewish community. Participating in the ceremony were a number of influential Rabbis, including Dr. K. Kohler of New York and Drs. Sabato Morais and Marcus Jastrow of Philadelphia, both of whom gave addresses. A.S. Solomons, Agent of the Baron de Hirsch Fund, lit the perpetual lamp.

A longer term associate of the Synagogue was H.L. Sabsovich, the "Builder of Woodbine", who was treasurer of the Woodbine Brotherhood, and negotiated the finances of the Synagogue with the Baron de Hirsch Fund. Sabsovich was born in Russia, and studied both law and agriculture there. After working in farming communities in Russia, he came to Colorado to do the same, from whence he was hired in 1890 by the Baron de Hirsch Fund to be the superintendent of Woodbine. For some thirty years he managed the affairs of the Colony, and it was he who organized and guided the model Baron de Hirsch Agricultural School, founded in 1894.

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D. Sources of Information

American Jewish Historical Society, Waltham, Mass.

Has all records of Woodbine and Woodbine Brotherhood, including some undated -- presumably turn of the century -- photographs of the Synagogue.

Living on the Land

Exhibition presented by the Museum of American Jewish History, Philadelphia, Anne Rothberg, Curator, summer, 1979. (Interpretive copy still available.)

~~Bibliography~~

Brandes, Joseph: Immigrants to Freedom: Jewish Communities in Rural New Jersey Since 1882. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971

_____ "Jewish Exponent", Dec. 4, 1896

Stevens, Lewis T.: The History of Cape May County. Cape May City, 1897

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A. General Statement

This building is a freestanding one-story synagogue with a balcony and full basement. The building is rectangular in plan, three bays by five bays, or approximately 36' by 56'. The roof is a simple gable. The primary entrance, at the rear of the Synagogue, is reached by a twin exterior stair. The building is in good condition, but most finishes, both interior and exterior, require some care.

B. Exterior

1. Foundations: Where visible (e.g., basement storage room), they are exclusively brick masonry.
2. Walls: Are rather soft brick, red to salmon in color. They were once painted brick red, but the paint is now peeling. There are raised brick quoins. The walls decrease in thickness at the head of the basement windows and again at the main floor level.
3. Structure and System: Bearing brick walls with wood interior framing. The balcony is carried on two rows of irregularly spaced posts. These posts lean on two beams, which are exposed below the basement ceiling; the beams are in turn supported on regularly-spaced posts. The roof spans from wall to wall without intermediate support.
4. Porches: The present entrance to the main sanctuary level is via an exterior twin stair structure. It is constructed of reinforced concrete and brick masonry, with brick facing.
5. Chimney: There is one chimney (ca. 1930). It is structurally independent of the building, but it abuts the entrance wall.
6. Openings - Doorways and Doors: The main entrance doorway is within the same masonry opening as the center window. The basement doorway is in the rear wall of the exterior stair structure. All of these doors have modern flush wood door panels. There is an undersized emergency exit door through a basement window opening.
Openings - Windows: The basement windows are double-hung, approximately five feet square. A flat arch composed of three rowlock courses spans the opening. The main window openings are approximately five feet by sixteen feet; a round arch composed of three rowlock courses, with a raised brick keystone, spans the opening. The original windows included four panes of casements (each sash with nine lights) surmounted by a fanlight. Except in the last sidewall openings nearest to the entrance and in the entrance wall openings, these casements have been replaced with double-hung windows. There is a circular window in the front (Washington Ave.) wall; the muntins of this window form a Star of David. This window, as well as the fanlights, is painted opaque white and deep blue on alternate panes. All sills are wood.
7. Roof - Shape, Covering: The roof is a simple gable, forty-two feet high at the ridge, covered with three-tab mineral surface asphalt shingles.
Roof - Cornice, Eaves: Above the main window openings there is an architrave of three courses of corbelled brick. Above this is a frieze, set back in the same plane as the main walls. The cornice

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consists of three courses of corbelled brick, one rowlock course with alternate bricks projecting to form dentils, and three more courses (with the first and third corbelled). There are raking cornices which exactly duplicate the primary cornice, except that the last three courses are partially concealed by a wood fascia. The roof rafters are exposed at the eaves. The drainage system is exposed and made of galvanized steel. The horizontal cornices show some deterioration, and plants have taken root there.

B. Interior

1. Plan - Main Floor: The entrance in the center bay opens to a vestibule (approximately thirty-four feet by eleven feet) with twin stairs both ascending and descending. The sanctuary (approximately thirty-four feet by forty-three feet) is furnished with pews in three rows. The Ark, containing the Torah, is on the south east wall, and the Bimah (reading desk) is in the center of the sanctuary. Both are elevated above the floor level, as required by tradition.

Plan - Balcony: The stairs are not enclosed at this level. The plan is U-shaped and the floor is terraced in three levels; each level includes a string of pews.

Plan - Basement: The entrance opens to a stairway and a vestibule beyond, below the exterior stair structure. The boiler room and a storage room flank the vestibule. Within the main structure, twin stairs rise approximately three feet to washrooms. The only interior stairways to the main floor are entered through the washrooms. The main basement room (vestry room) has a small stage platform at the front wall. Above this stage, the ceiling is raised along the underside of the Ark. A kitchen area is partitioned in one rear corner. There is a stair serving an emergency exit in the east corner.

2. Flooring: There is sheet linoleum flooring in the sanctuary and basement. The balcony and the stairs leading to it have carpet over painted pine floor boards.
3. Walls and Ceiling Finish: In the sanctuary, walls are painted plaster with painted beaded board wainscoting. In the basement the walls are covered with painted composition board. The sanctuary ceiling consists of painted beaded boards formed into rectangular panels. The boards in adjacent panels are oriented in different directions. The central ceiling panel is a square, rotated forty-five degrees. A Star of David is inscribed within. The basement ceiling is painted beaded board.
4. Doors and Doorways: Large panelled wooden pivot doors, now painted, separate the vestibule and sanctuary. All other doors are common panel doors.
5. Interior Trim: The Ark was built with the building, its platform having been framed in lieu of any level floor at that point. The Bimah is apparently of a later date. The Ark, portions of the balcony stairway, and the balcony itself, have substantial turned newel posts and balusters. The remaining railings follow the pattern of the originals, but are simpler and are made of smaller stock.

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6. Mechanical and Electrical: There are modern fluorescent ceiling fixtures throughout the building. A brass electric chandelier hangs below the Star of David panel in the ceiling. The present heating system is an oil-fired (converted from coal) hydronic system with heat supplied by two ceiling-mounted fan-coil units at the rear of each level. The boiler is located below the exterior stair structure, outside of the original structure. There is evidence of an earlier flue in the west corner of the first floor. The electrical system includes a substantial amount of knob-and-tube vintage wiring, including wood wire-mold, etc.

C Site

Orientation: The four corners of the building are oriented nearly toward the cardinal directions. The entrance is at the rear of the building, presumably to allow the assembled congregation to face as easterly as possible while still maintaining a position of the building regular to the line of the street.

PART III PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by Rietz & Rietz Architects, Philadelphia, under contract with the Borough of Woodbine, as a first step in planning for the reuse of the Woodbine Brotherhood Synagogue.

Historical documentation, research, and a National Register nomination were prepared by Trina Vaux. All field survey work, drawings of the existing building, and reuse study were prepared by Thomas Ewing. All photography for HABS and National Register purposes was done by Michael Brooks. Hugh J. McCauley, AIA, was project supervisor and coordinator.